

'Lies, a kick in the guts'

Coalition promises return of licences

A VICTORIAN Liberal and National Party government would restore Alpine National Park cattle licenses but is coy about how quickly it could be done.

National Party leader Peter Ryan said the decision to kick cattle out of the high country was a cheap stunt to buy votes.

"This is just a way to get the green vote in eastern Melbourne," he said at the cattlemen's rally at Rose River yesterday.

"There never was, and never will be, a reason to kick the cattle out of the high country."

"If we win government the cattlemen will be back on the high plains."

Mr Ryan said the cattlemen's plight was a lightning rod to many issues affecting country Victorians.

"People are sick of this Government, they are angry and yes, this issue is a vote-changer," he said.

But Mr Ryan said it was not a simple task to get the cattle back on the high plains.

However, he said the Coalition would ensure that the tradition of high country cattlemen was not lost and he would make it a priority to address the issue if voted to power.

"We have the will to put the cattle back there and the proper process will be a matter for the government of the day," he said.

"But we have the will to do it."

Opposition spokesman for rural issues Phillip Davis told the cattlemen they had his party's full support.

"We oppose the ban on cattle grazing and are unequivocally committed to returning the cattlemen's high country licences," he said.

"Everyone in the parliamentary Liberal party room supports this, full stop."

"This is the last vestige of our pioneering history and must be preserved."

"We stand beside the cattlemen for the rest of this fight."

Liberal member for Central Highlands Province Graeme Stoney, who rode through the national park in protest of the cattlemen's ban, said it could be fixed with a stroke of a pen.

"This action was taken quickly and I see no reason why it can't be reversed just as quickly," he said.

"It is as simple as the stroke of a pen."



● Graham Forbes launches his horse into the first creek crossing in the Cattlemen's Cup yesterday in the high country.

A tradition lost

DICK Dale dispels the myth that high-country grazing was the private domain of a few select farmers.

The Myrtleford man, 60, followed in his father's footsteps and started droving to the high country when just 13.

He mustered mobs for legendary cattlemen Billy Hicks and Wally Ryder and was still taking cattle to the high plains in the summer of the 2003 bushfires.

"In those early days there were no roads, all the supplies for the men and horses had to be taken in on pack horse," he said.

"We'd be up there for a fortnight so you had to take food, blankets, horse rugs and a lot of chaff."

"At the end of the summer we'd muster mobs from Mt Bogong, then move on to the cattle on the Bogong High Plains before travelling to Dargo to bring them

down — it was pretty busy — sometimes we'd take cattle into NSW for agistment at the end of the season."

"We didn't have a licence but it was our life and it could be lost forever."

Mr Dale believes the cattle were the caretakers of the high country.

"They didn't do much damage, they'd nibble here and there but with so much country they just kept the growth in check," he said.

"I'm worried that despite the promises of the politicians that now it's gone, it's gone forever."

"Once they stop something it's pretty hard to get it started again."

Now, Mr Dale, said the high plains had been left to feral pests and weeds.

"You should see how many deer are up there now," he said.



● Mr Dale started droving cattle in the high country when he was 13.

and hospitality abused'

Campaign to turn outrage into vote against Bracks



MOUNTAIN cattlemen say they have been lied to, kicked in the guts and their hospitality abused by the Victorian Government.

And yesterday at Rose River, a forested valley about 70km from Wangaratta, more than 4000 cattlemen, their families and supporters said retribution was near.

They plan to defy bans on national park entry by driving mobs through the high country until they get their licences back and have called for their supporters to vote against the Victorian Government at the November election.

It was the mountain cattlemen's association annual weekend get-together and the record turnout saw the event not as a wake after the loss of high-country cattle grazing licences but a commitment to its future.

"A lot of people say this is the last cattlemen's do — like hell it is," one of the crowd said.

Cattlemen's president Doug Treasure was part of the driving team that brought a symbolic mob of cattle to Rose River yesterday to the cheers and applause of the crowd.

He urged them to vote against Labor at the next state election and they cheered.

"The political reality is that we have a Labor Government kicking us out and an Opposition saying they will put us back in if they win gov-

ernment," Mr Treasure said.

"The Government has lied to us, misrepresented us and turned their backs on our hospitality.

"I have a message for everyone here that supports us — vote against the Bracks Government at the next election.

"We also need other country groups to defy the Government in the same way — they should do it for their own sakes, to preserve their way of life."

Mr Treasure said the cattlemen had become scapegoats for a community using fossil fuels at an unsustainable rate.

"To kick a few cows off the high country is a vote-catching exercise, when the same Government doesn't have the guts to face the real issues," he said.

"Much of the high country is deteriorating, not because of cattle, but because of poor management, pests and weeds."

And he promised to continue driving stock through the Alpine National Park until his licence was returned.

"We will do it to retain our culture and heritage," Mr Treasure said.

"This is something that goes back more than 170 years."

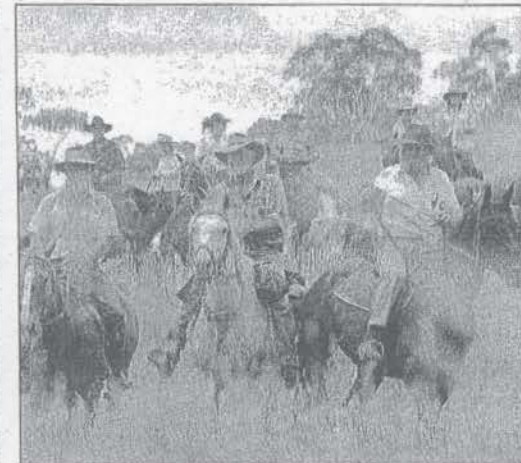
"The only thing that will stop that protest action is for the Minister to give us meaningful concessions."



● John Lovick rides into the Rose River campsite, leading cattle that have been grazed in the mountains.



● More than 4000 people gathered to continue the protest against the decision to ban alpine grazing.



● Doug Treasure, Graeme Stoney and Charlie Lovick lead the cattle out of the mountains in yesterday's protest.